



Standing figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Standing figure

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 732 x w. 86 x d. 80 mm

Accession Number: 928


Historic Period: 15th/16th century (?)

Production Place: Africa, Mali

Cultural Group: Dogon, Tellem

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1986

Tradition tells that the Dogon came to their present home in about the fifteenth century to find the Tellem already there, and they coexisted with them for about two centuries before the Tellem, already in decline, finally disappeared. Statues found in caves were used by the Dogon as part of their heritage and were highly venerated. In 1960, investigations began in some of the caves of the Bandiagara cliff escarpment, an impressive natural feature some two hundred kilometres long and six hundred metres high. Several exploratory expeditions have taken place with the cooperation of the Mali authorities, and as a result there is now a corpus of finds, including skeletal remains, showing that the Tellem were distinct from the Dogon (Bedaux, 1977: 74-8).

Radiocarbon dating for the wood of thirty statues spans the 11th to the 17th centuries, divided into three periods: Tellem (11th-15th centuries); Tellem-Dogon transitional (15th-16th centuries); and Dogon only (17th century on). Given fresh wood is easier to carve, and that old wood is very scarce in the Bandiagara region, these sculptures are probably contemporary with the wood.

Two comparable figures shown by Bedaux have been radiocarbon dated to the Tellem period (11th-15th centuries). Nevertheless, a question mark still hangs over the early dating of 'Tellem' wood-carvings, as the radiocarbon analysis reports have been mislaid (Bedaux, 1977: 76). Many 'Tellem' pieces could be the work of Dogon carvers working in the transitional period or later; some of the stylistically 'Tellem' statuettes had a later radiocarbon reading than others which were apparently Dogon. It seems likely that facets of Dogon cosmogony and art stem from, or were influenced by, Tellem culture.

The thick crust of sacrificial patina on many Tellem/Dogon pieces is a mixture of boiled millet and blood applied by the Dogon, and perhaps also the Tellem, as part of their rituals. In this figure the patina has mostly been cleaned off, revealing the faintly roseate tinge of the wood, and also some of the carving detail.

Contemporary Dogon cosmology has been studied in depth since the 1930s by French researchers, most notably Marcel Griaule and his students, and Dogon origin myths may assist in illuminating this possibly transitional Tellem/Dogon piece (see Griaule, 1965). The Creator God, Amma (the sky), made the Earth, and had intercourse with her. The offspring were a pair of celestial beings, *nommo*, and then four other pairs. The *nommo* brought the skills of farming, weaving, and iron-working to mankind. Twinship and androgyny are basic elements of Dogon religion, so *nommo* are depicted as hermaphrodite or asexual, befitting their role as immortals, usually with sinuous bodies and with raised arms. This may refer to the Cosmic Figure with Raised Arms, alluding to man's desire for immortality, and also the *axismundi* linking the earth (female principle) to the sky (male principle).

Nommo are often shown as seated pairs (see the crown in no. 80, UEA 927); where they occur singly they may show both male and female characteristics. Many *nommo* are carved with a flat, plank-like back; in this example the small figure standing on the buttocks of the larger is a rather unusual portrayal of a *nommo* pair.

On the outer edge of the raised plank-like arms the small notches, in groups of three, may refer to the Dogon ritual ladder (a notched log), and to the 'chain' that held the *nommo* ark during its descent to earth and by which *nommo* 'climb back up' to the sky. They may also refer to the broken line, a concept of Dogon thought associated with the vibratory movement of growth when combined with verticality.

Almost all figure carvings on the continent of Africa portray the arms in relationship to the body, whether at the sides, on the stomach or breasts, or holding a child or object. Tellem sculptures form a group apart, as they raise their arms above the head; this characteristic attitude combined with their encrustation suggests that they indeed belong to a different, older, culture.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 104-105.

Provenance

Collected at Sanga, in the southern Bandiagara Escarpment, in 1956.

Formerly in the Lazard Collection, Paris.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1986 on the advice of Robert Sainsbury out of funds provided by the Sainsbury Purchasing Fund.
